

Theater Review: Brown Paper Box Co.'s 'They're Playing Our Song' is Bright Entertainment

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CHICAGO – During the late disco era of the 1970s, an unusual musical opened on Broadway. Essentially a two person stage play, “They’re Playing Our Song” involved a songwriter and a lyricist who develop a stronger connection than just writing partners. The always passionate Brown Paper Box Co. of Chicago has unearthed this chestnut with a bright and fun revival at the Rivendell Theatre through August 20th, 2017.



Play Rating: **3.5/5.0**

The musical, which has music by the great Broadway composer Marvin Hamlisch (“A Chorus Line”) and lyrics by famed pop wordsmith Carole Bayer Sayer, is based on their short 1970s relationship. The book is by Neil Simon (“The Odd Couple, “Lost in Yonkers”) and is one of his weaker efforts, but the Brown Paper Box Company cast is up to task of breathing life into it, and the music and performances compensate for the clunky dialogue and situations. As always, this company leads the way in the expansion of what storefront theater can do.



Sonia (Carmen Risi) and Vernon (Dan Gold) of 'They're Playing Our Song'

Photo credit: Zach Dries for BrownPaperBox.org

Vernon (Dan Gold) is an Oscar and Grammy winning composer, but needs a new lyricist. Enter Sonia (Carmen Risi), a ditzy but sincere song poet who has had one major hit record. Vernon loves one of her offerings ("Fallin'"), but needs more in another song ("Workin' It Out"). Sonia is also working on her broken heart, having just ended a relationship with the unseen Leon ("If He Really Knew Me"). An attraction between the two collaborators start to develop, but their first date is interrupted when their tunes play at the restaurant ("They're Playing Our Song"). The on-again, off-again nature of their relationship culminates in new music ("I Still Believe in Love") and heartache ("Fill in the Words").

One the more clever elements of the play is that each of the characters have a three-person "greek chorus" to perform their emotions and add harmonies to their songs. There is a ton of liveliness on stage when all six join in the energy of the tunes, especially on "Their Playing Our Song." The director Daniel Spagnuolo was also the choreographer, so the movement of both choruses became as interesting as their filling of the emotional void.

The two actors portraying Vernon and Sonia are strong, although both could have used some more tutoring in the rhythm of delivering Neil Simon jokes (maybe a marathon viewing of "Plaza Suite"?). It took Dan Gold a bit of time to warm into the character of Vernon, but the restaurant scene is where he took off. Carmen Risi is appropriately conflicted and silly as Sonia, and also projects the poignancy of her lost love and the ardor of her new relationship. Both deliver the songs with solid renderings, playing off a pre-recorded soundtrack.



Vernon, Sonia and Their Greek Choruses in 'They're Playing Our Song'

Photo credit: Zach Dries for BrownPaperBox.org

The play is a bit long, and probably – given the thinness of the Neil Simon's book – could have been trimmed. This is not Simon's best effort by hundreds of miles, but still features his particular rhythm, which handcuffed Gold and Risi at times. Delivering a joke requires precise timing, and this is one of those plays where a Swiss watch accuracy was necessary, yet in this staging it sometimes devolved to a fake Rolex. The songs made up for everything, tuneful and rich, with Gold and Risi delivering them like the UPS on Christmas Eve.

The main advantage of seeing "They're Playing Our Song" is the intimacy of the space at Rivendell Theatre, between Chicago's Andersonville and Edgewater neighborhoods. There is a power in being nearly part of the musical, especially with the particular zeal and vitality that the Brown Paper Box Co. puts into every production. It's good to know they're playing that song in their stage art.

The Brown Paper Box Company Presents "They're Playing Our Song" at the Rivendell Theatre, 5779 North Ridge in Chicago, Thursday-Sunday through August 20th, 2017. [Click here](#) [20] for more information, dates/times and to purchase tickets. Featuring Carmen Risi, Dan Gold, Mike Danovich, Bradley Halverson, Elissa Newcorn, Ariana Cappuccitti, Deanalis Reston, Megan Gill and Joshua A. Peterson, Music and Lyrics by Marvin Hamlisch and Carole Bayer Sager. Book by Neil Simon. Directed and Choreographed by Daniel Spagnuolo.



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